
TRADITION AND INNOVATION AT CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES: IDEAS FROM BERNARD LONERGAN

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This article discusses applications of Lonergan's thinking on tradition and innovation to the world of Catholic education. Even now, at the beginning of the 21st century and 20 years after his death, it is worthwhile to explore his understanding of tradition and innovation, with attention to how it related to the Catholic intellectual culture of his own time and, more importantly, how it might contribute to an understanding of the identity of Catholic educational institutions in today's period of great transition. In recent years, faculty members and administrators at Catholic universities have been engaged in many discussions about the Catholic intellectual tradition and Catholic higher education. Most of the attention in these conversations has gone to the issue of what it means to be Catholic. The next step is to explore what it means to have a tradition. Thus, this essay examines the usefulness of one leading 20th century Catholic intellectual's approach to tradition as it relates to Catholic education in general and to Catholic universities in particular.

Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit theologian and philosopher who lived from 1904-1984, aimed to do Catholic theology on what he described as “the level of the times.” In his day, this entailed bringing Catholic thought into dialogue with the social and natural sciences, historical consciousness, and modern philosophy. In our own time, in Catholic higher education, this dialogue is taken for granted. What has become more challenging for many today, especially for Catholic theologians, is an understanding of tradition that maintains identity while embracing a life-giving pluralism. The Catholic intellectual tradition, understood not as an artifact but as a process, is always at its best when its capacity for innovation is fully functioning.

To explore Lonergan's approach to tradition, we begin with a few comments about what he said directly about tradition. In itself, however, this will not suffice because a fuller understanding of a tradition demands a consideration of the dynamics of community, the workings of history, and the nature of meaning. We will examine each of these and will conclude with some thoughts on the relevance of Lonergan's thinking to a few key issues facing contemporary Catholic universities.

TRADITION

Lonergan's recognition of the ambiguous status of tradition is clear in his distinction between authentic and inauthentic tradition. He asserts that a tradition may be described as authentic in one or two senses: (1) in its faithfulness to the original message it seeks to carry forward, and/or (2) in its embodiment and promotion of conversion. In the first sense, authentic tradition is "a long accumulation of insights, adjustments, reinterpretations that repeat the original message afresh for each age" (Lonergan, 1972, p. 162). In contrast, inauthentic tradition offers only a "watering down of the original message," a recasting of it in terms that satisfy those who have dodged what he calls "radical conversion" (Lonergan, 1972, p. 162). Hence, a tradition that is authentic retains its connection to the original message by continually opening itself to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Note that for Lonergan a tradition may stand in need of conversion and may be either authentic or inauthentic.

Along with the issue of the authenticity or inauthenticity of the tradition itself is the question of an individual's authenticity in relation to a tradition. Lonergan points out the complexity of this matter. A person may authentically appropriate an inauthentic tradition. Conversely, a person may inauthentically appropriate an authentic tradition. In this latter case, the person promotes a decay of what is authentic in the tradition, and the tradition itself may eventually become inauthentic. Thus, the individual's relation to the tradition is not just a private concern even though it is deeply personal. The appropriation of a tradition, whether authentic or inauthentic, takes place within the context of community. Tradition as a process is communal.

COMMUNITY

Lonergan's perspectives on the notion of community are shaped by the centrality of meaning and value in his thought. A community is not just any assortment of individuals living near each other geographically. A community is "an achievement of common meaning," one that may be linguistic, religious, cultural, social, political, or domestic (Lonergan, 1972, p. 79). Communities are constituted by meaning and communicate meaning. Common experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments actualize shared meaning.

Communities provide our first experiences of meaning, which allow us to grow in experience, understanding, and judgment and to become able to decide what to make of ourselves. The common meanings that we are born into have been shaped by previous generations who received the meanings common to their time and then put their own stamp on them as they passed them on to the next generation. In Lonergan's words, "common meanings have histories" (1972, p. 78). Since community is an achievement of common meaning, it should not be surprising that community, like meaning itself, is never a fixed and permanent achievement. While meaning may enjoy the refinements that come with genuine development, it does not escape the effects of the bias generative

of decline. And so, the coherence of any community, any achievement of common meaning, is never a secure possession.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The importance of meaning and value shine through in Lonergan's approach to historical consciousness. Essential to his project of doing both theology and philosophy on the level of the times was making a shift from classicism to historical consciousness, a shift vital to the Second Vatican Council. In a 1966 article entitled "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Consciousness," Lonergan (1974b) contrasts an abstract, ahistorical view of the human person (classicism) with a concrete, historical perspective that arises out of an empirical notion of culture. The terms "historical consciousness" or "historical mindedness" in that essay and elsewhere indicate more than an awareness that we live in history or that our lives have been shaped by inherited meanings and values. Historical consciousness, in a fuller sense, refers to a consciousness of oneself as responsible for the *making* of history. Historical consciousness is the awareness that human beings "individually are responsible for their lives and collectively are responsible for the world in which they live" (Lonergan, 1988a, p. 229).

Similarly, the term historicity carries with it the sense that we not only inherit our world, but we also contribute to making it what it is and what it will be. In his book *Method in Theology*, Lonergan brings together this sense of "historicity," its dual reference to the historically situated character of our lives and to our responsibility for the making of history. He describes human historicity as "an existential history – the living tradition which formed us and thereby brought us to the point where we began forming ourselves" (Lonergan, 1972, p. 210). At this point, he insists, tradition becomes something other than an inescapable fate, and history becomes something that is made rather than merely written about (Lonergan, 1972).

PROGRESS AND DECLINE IN HUMAN AFFAIRS

Human creativity and action may be in the service of either good or evil. Individual and collective responsibility for world affairs, then, implies the possibility of either social progress or social decline, of either developments or breakdowns in the human good. For Lonergan (1974b), historical process is fundamentally a compound of progress, decline, and redemption.

Lonergan rejects the notion of automatic progress and offers his own analysis of the inner workings of decline. In *Insight* he discusses two types of decline that reflect distortions in a community's life. The first of these is what he calls the shorter cycle of decline, which stems from group bias. In the grip of such bias, the self-interest of a group will lead its members to champion only those ideas that help justify its existence or its dominance in relation to other groups. Such selectivity, with its disregard of possibly vital insights, breeds a deterioration of the

social situation. The shorter cycle of decline, then, "turns upon ideas that are neglected by dominant groups only to be championed later by depressed groups" (Lonergan, 1992, p. 252). Lonergan is not condemning the raising of the voices of the oppressed who are called by God to claim their own dignity; rather, his critique applies to those who would maintain their oppression for selfish reasons.

There is also a longer cycle of decline in which the problem is general bias, with its overvaluation of common sense and its preference for short-term benefits at the cost of long-term gains. The effects of general bias are especially destructive to human progress because the common sense that it upholds as omnicompetent is, in Lonergan's words, "unequal to the task of thinking on the level of history" (1992, p. 253). The general bias of common sense is unequal to thinking on the level of history because it rejects the scientific and philosophic insights that would promote the higher integrations capable of meeting long-term challenges and expanding the realm of conscious grasp and deliberate choice. The longer cycle's repeated neglect of the timely ideas born of detached and disinterested intelligence results in a succession of ever less comprehensive viewpoints and a cumulative deterioration of the social situation (Lonergan, 1992).

Lonergan contends that the reversal of the longer cycle is to be met "not by any idea or set of ideas on the level of technology, economics, or politics, but only by the attainment of a higher viewpoint in man's understanding and making of man" (1992, p. 258). The higher viewpoint advocated by Lonergan includes both cognitive and existential dimensions, both understanding and action. What is needed, he asserts, is "a withdrawal from practicality in order to save practicality" (1992, p. 266). What is needed is "a heightened grasp of historical origins, a discovery of historical responsibilities" (1992, p. 266).

There is, then, the possibility of reversing decline and of initiating progress. Although Lonergan uses the terms progress and decline as *social* analogues to the developments and breakdowns of individuals, social progress depends on the development of *the persons* who constitute the social situation and, similarly, social decline results from the intellectual, moral, religious, and affective breakdowns of individual persons. In the words of Lonergan, progress "proceeds from originating value, from subjects being their true selves by observing the transcendental precepts, Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible" (1972, p. 53). Progress is ever precarious, however. Lonergan recognizes that there is a radical problem, a fundamental impediment to sustained progress, that cannot be solved by a correct philosophy, ethics, or human science (1992). This problem consists in the human "incapacity for sustained development," and its ultimate solution lies only in the grace of God that enables human beings to cooperate with God in the divinely originated solution to the problem of evil (Lonergan, 1992). Acknowledging that efforts to overcome decline and to promote progress present a staggering challenge, Lonergan (1972) discerns an important function of religion in relation to the social situation. He argues that only a religion which promotes a depth of compassion that embraces forgiveness will have a redemptive role in human society.

HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE: A SUMMARY

It might be helpful at this point to pull together some of the key ingredients in Lonergan's understanding of historical experience. In the human experience of time, the present consists not in a fixed instant but in a flow in which past, present, and future currents converge. The present arises from the movements of our past, the past that we have both inherited and helped to create. The present also includes a pull toward the future, an anticipation of future possibilities. The actual realization of future possibilities, of those that Lonergan calls concretely possible schemes of recurrence, occurs in accord with successive schedules of probabilities. The inner design of the universe and of human history is thus one of emergent probability. There does not seem to be an overarching plan or blueprint for history. The goal of historical process is simply whatever becomes determinate in the process itself.

An important feature of that determination is human initiative and responsibility for the making of history. The capacity of human beings to alter or to eliminate currently functioning schemes of recurrence and to bring into emergence less probable schemes gives generalized emergent probability a significant flexibility. The capacity of human beings to make choices, a capacity which effectively exists in varying degrees, introduces a wide range of possibilities for, on the one hand, personal development and social progress and for, on the other hand, personal breakdown and social decline.

Social progress results from the self-transcendence, the graced self-realization of human persons. Continuous social progress is not the experience history gives witness to, however. The incapacity of human beings for sustained self-transcendence leads to decline. The ultimate solution to the problem of decline is religious, in Lonergan's opinion. In this context religion is understood not as any one particular institution but as that which promotes a love that, acting in cooperation with God, is strong enough to break the cycle of retribution that fuels decline.

THE WORLD MEDIATED BY MEANING

Another angle on Lonergan's historically conscious approach to tradition is his presentation of the way in which the meanings that constitute tradition operate in different realms. Lonergan distinguishes between the world of immediacy, exemplified in the world of the infant, and the world mediated by meaning. His discussion of the world mediated by meaning provides a historically conscious approach to tradition and innovation. What he describes as "patterns of experience" in *Insight*, his major philosophical work of the 1950s, become in his *Method in Theology* "six realms of meaning," which correspond to the demands and desires of the human spirit. They are the realms of common sense, theory, interiority, transcendence, scholarship, and art. As he explains each one, it becomes evident that no single realm of meaning can capture the fullness of human life.

First, there is common sense, that form of meaning which is universal to all people in their own way. In the realm of common sense, our concern is with persons and things, not in relation to each other, but in relation to us. This is the everyday world in which we interact with others and learn through trial and error. Although the actual content of common sense has as many varieties as there are everyday worlds in which people live, its basic way of functioning remains the same from culture to culture. It applies its procedures, those of trial and error, without awareness of their limitations. Common sense, however valuable – even essential – it may be, is not sufficient in itself. Questions arise that common sense, with its limited competence, cannot answer. Thus, we are compelled to enter into the world of theory, the realm of meaning concerned with the relations of objects to each other. A technical language develops to describe these relationships and to aid in understanding them more fully.

We can see how Lonergan's categories remain relevant to those involved in Catholic education. People in leadership positions in Catholic education usually find themselves employing both common sense and theoretical modes of reasoning. Administrators, for example, draw on their own experience and on the experience of a particular community. Indeed, Catholic education has a long tradition and thus serves as a marvelous fund of experience. In their common sense mode, administrators draw on personal and collective experience as they immerse themselves in the practical concerns pressing upon them in their own work setting. Still, as they envision Catholic education for the 21st century they must consider theories that go beyond the scope of the immediately practical (e.g., social scientific analyses of large demographic trends or theological reflections on globalization or philosophical approaches to justice). Without some attention to theory, Catholic education could be parochial in the worst sense. Without the gifts of solid common sense, however, Catholic education would be ineffective in shaping the leaders of tomorrow who will need facility with both common sense and theory in order to contribute to the world in meaningful ways.

Eventually we may begin asking not just about what we know, but about the process of knowing. Three basic questions arise: (1) what am I doing when I am knowing? (2) why is doing that knowing? (3) what do I know when I do it? Lonergan uses the term "interiority," a word which may seem to some ears an odd designation for the realm of meaning characterized by these questions. Some might be tempted to confuse interiority with the cultivation of one's spirituality. For Lonergan, however, the realm of interiority is one in which we appropriate the dynamism of our own intentional consciousness and appreciate the need to move beyond common sense and into the other realms of meaning.

It is in the fourth realm of meaning that religious love comes to the fore as a kind of meaning. Lonergan states that the realm of transcendence in which God is known and loved offers us the fulfillment of our deepest longings.

To these four fundamental realms of meaning Lonergan adds two more, those of scholarship and art. Scholarship, in Lonergan's (1972) categories, combines the common sense of its own time and place with a commonsense style of

understanding that grasps the meanings that came from the common sense of another people, place, or time. Finally, the artistic realm of meaning is that in which we respond to the beautiful and produce objects of beauty.

It is in their approach to this richness of human experience that we see a crucial difference between classicism and historical consciousness. Lonergan asserts that classical consciousness operates comfortably in the realms of common sense and theory, but it lacks the self-appropriation to distinguish effectively among the procedures pertinent to the different realms of meaning. Historical consciousness, in its most fully operational form, has the ability to distinguish among the kinds of meaning characteristic of common sense, theory, interiority, transcendence, scholarship, and art. Furthermore, it is able to grasp these dimensions of meaning without fossilizing them. In what some may view as an irony, historical consciousness is capable of keeping tradition alive in a way in which classicism, with all of its emphasis on conserving the past, never truly can. To offer another twist to this discussion: it is historical consciousness' sophification with meaning that allows it to set free within a tradition its impulses for authentic innovation. Scholarship and art, for example, thrive and move forward when not burdened with the flat and inappropriate expectations of common sense. Similarly, projects demanding the procedures of common sense are most likely to succeed when the persons engaged in them recognize the value as well as the limitations of such procedures. In sum, tradition, understood in a historically conscious fashion, is constituted by different kinds of meaning and is best approached with attention to the complexities attendant to that reality. Catholic education, which aspires to foster competence in all of these realms of meaning, can offer the further contribution of promoting awareness of the differences between them and the significance of each to the fullness of human life.

THE MEDIATION OF MEANING

Another aspect of meaning as it relates to tradition and innovation involves how meaning is mediated. Here we need to focus on two Lonerganian concepts: self-mediation and mutual self-mediation (Lonergan, 1996). One form of self-mediation, according to Lonergan, is self-consciousness. Growth in self-consciousness is an adventure in self-discovery and a call to decision about what we are to make of our lives. Self-consciousness invites us to step out of the pack of drifters who simply follow what everyone else is doing. Although this description may seem focused on individual decision, Lonergan points out that this process of self-discovery and decision takes place within the community we share with families, other human beings, and God – and today we would add the natural world. Again, we see Lonergan argue that community is an intentional reality that is sustained, if not initially formed, by the decisions and commitments of its members.

The life of a community is a dynamic one that is not restricted to the received idea of its identity. Lonergan stresses that a change in the community's

normative meaning, in its understanding of what it ought to be, opens up new possibilities for its future. The self-mediation of a community, its revelation of itself to itself, occurs in its living, in the way it revises its common meanings, values, and commitments in response to challenges and opportunities for growth.

Lonergan extends this analysis of self-mediation to the persons within the community. They reveal themselves to themselves and others in their living. The community offers them concrete possibilities and constraints, but it is their own living that manifests the existential decisions they have made in regard to their situation. Self-mediation, then, is the revelation of the meanings inherent in a community or a person. Recognizing that communities and individual persons are dynamic and interactive, Lonergan introduces the notion of mutual self-mediation, a process of mutual influence and transformation. Mutual self-mediation occurs in romantic love, education, family relationships, friendships, and collegiality in the workplace. Mutual self-mediation may be conceived of as an exercise of praxis, a method of reflective action. It may also be understood as the process of tradition, a process in which innovation occurs as individuals and communities interact. Innovation that is authentic, that grows out of and further cultivates graced self-realization, will promote the vitality of the persons and communities involved.

CONCLUSION:

TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND THE CATHOLIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

There are at least three ways in which Lonergan's understanding of tradition and innovation is of interest to those reflecting upon the situation of Catholic higher education today. First, Lonergan's approach to tradition quite rightly stresses the need for authenticity in the tradition and in those who would appropriate it. The university, it would seem, should be a place where dialogues are directed to the goal of moving closer to that which is authentic and are conducted in a spirit of open inquiry, in keeping with the best notions of academic freedom. Questions of meaning and value should animate such a campus.

Second, Lonergan's discussion of progress and decline in human history suggests that the quest for authenticity just described is difficult in practice. In a paper first published in the early 1950s, "The Role of a Catholic University in the Modern World," Lonergan states that the university seeks to be a place of intellectual integration but that this issue is "intricate" (1988b). He makes three brief remarks in this regard. First of all, he asserts that "integration presupposes purification, for human change is ambiguously good" (Lonergan, 1988b, p. 113). Secondly, he contends that "the purifier must be pure, for purification itself is a human change and so is subject to ambiguity" (p. 113). Finally, he claims that the empirical sciences, with their descriptive approaches, their atten-

tion to human beings as they actually are, raise the question of moral evil in new ways that are perhaps sharper than ever. He proposes that in this situation theology actually gains greater rather than lesser relevance, given its long effort to understand the reality of sin in human life. Thus, even in the 1950s Lonergan grasped many of the challenges to the university's goal of authentic integration that persist in our own time.

By the late 1960s, he was even more emphatic about the need for universities, especially Catholic institutions, to meet their responsibilities to the larger world. In "Theology and Man's Future" he identifies a shift from conceiving of the university as a storehouse of knowledge to understanding it as an agent of social and cultural change:

For the university has ceased to be a storehouse whence traditional wisdom and knowledge are dispensed. It is a center in which ever-increasing knowledge is disseminated to bring about ever-increasing social and cultural change. It has a grave responsibility for the future of man. (Lonergan, 1974a, p. 135)

Theology has a special role to play as universities take on the challenges of the times, according to Lonergan. He observes that theology undertaken in a university setting has been influenced by developments in historical studies, philosophy, religious studies, and studies of culture. This influence can be mutual, he contends; theology can influence the work of the social sciences and the humanities, as well as incorporate what is good in their contributions to learning. In particular, he argues that social scientific approaches that are not modelled strictly on the example of the natural sciences need to address questions of meaning and value, questions with which theology has had long experience. Theology has a contribution to make to the humanities as well, insofar as religion is an enduring component of authentic human experience.

Lonergan also alludes to Cardinal Newman's belief that omitting a significant component of knowledge, such as theology, from a program of learning has detrimental effects on the whole of knowing. Lonergan acknowledges that many universities have dropped theology from their curriculum and explicitly wonders what the impact of omitting theology has been on the broader educational experience. He concludes that he is not sure, as a matter of fact, what the impact has been, and then makes the argument that theology does have something to offer other disciplines.

Today we would take the challenges presented here beyond the boundaries of the campus to the larger struggle for social justice that is so fundamental to the Catholic vision of life. In what ways can the university offer its resources to struggles for justice? In what ways does the university need to model justice in order to serve as a credible resource? Certainly these answers are not the sole province of theology departments, although theologians should respond generously with the riches of their discipline, not the least of which is Catholic social

teaching. Moreover, Lonergan's analysis of general bias reminds us that there is a role for investigations of a more theoretical nature, forms of inquiry that find a home in the university. Problems such as the ecological crisis, for example, require "big picture" thinking with ample empirical study; ecological matters require a truly interdisciplinary approach, with some attention to theory. Issues related to economic justice require not only good practical judgment, but knowledge of a more theoretical nature. If we are to move beyond charity and get on with the work of justice, which requires attention to social structures, it would be best if we knew economics and something about politics as well.

In other words, well directed action requires some level of theoretical reflection, the kind of theoretical grounding almost taken for granted by professors and students at universities. Are such people the only producers of true knowledge? Is theoretical knowledge the only valid and valuable form of knowing? The answer offered here is a resounding "no" to both questions. Yet, theoretical knowledge, when not utterly divorced from practice, does have value in a complex world such as ours. Those who teach and learn in universities should acknowledge that reality without shame, but should also consider the responsibilities that come with the privilege of such an education and access to such resources.

A third idea about the usefulness of Lonergan's thinking on tradition and innovation concerns the importance of meaning as constitutive of human institutions, including universities. Obviously, many kinds of meanings – in persons, texts, rituals, art, organizations, and theories – make up traditions. Innovation often occurs through changes of meaning that are dramatic but sometimes may happen with changes that are just barely perceptible. Innovations often arise from conversions, some coming in the form of great upheaval, others appearing as a more organic process of growth.

It is worth considering the implications of Lonergan's emphasis on tradition (or history) as something that is made as well as given. In today's context this understanding of historical consciousness resonates deeply with an understanding of the university as a place in which students, faculty, and administrators are challenged by the call to social responsibility and solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Theologian Copeland (1995) has suggested that community is not so much a given as it is a project, a struggle for solidarity that respects concrete human personhood understood in all its particularity as a complex of gender, race, social class, and ethnic-cultural heritage.

Another way to consider this issue is from the perspective of Lonergan's notion of community. Clearly, the appropriation of a tradition within the context of a community formed by shared experiences, understandings, and judgments would seem to be a smooth process. Such is rarely the case in today's world. In the Catholic university this issue is particularly crucial and complex. Catholic colleges and universities were founded by people who had a shared set of experiences, understandings, and judgments. Today's Catholic universities are pluralistic to an extent that their founders could never have envisioned. This plural-

ism is exciting and enriching, yet is also challenging. At many Catholic universities this challenge will be met by intentionally working together to create a new set of shared experiences, understandings, and judgments that are in continuity with the best of the past but open to enhancement by the inclusion of new voices and visions. As Catholic universities become increasingly more articulate about the meanings and values that constitute their missions, they are able to build a community that, though religiously diverse, is able to share in some common goals while respecting difference.

In a sense, this project goes beyond intellectual understanding and demands a sophisticated appreciation of the affective aspects of meaning. Lonergan does indeed acknowledge the affective aspect of life, increasingly so in his later works. For him, feeling gives our consciousness "its mass, momentum, drive, power" (Lonergan, 1972, p. 30). Without these feelings, he suggests, "our knowing and deciding would be paper thin" (pp. 30-31). As a Jesuit schooled in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Lonergan has a powerful sense of the role of feelings in the process of discernment. Essentially, for him feelings are intentional responses to values.

Lonergan's emphasis on the more intellectual dimension of university life needs to be complemented with attention to the importance of affectivity within the university and beyond it. The promotion of solidarity that is part of the Catholic university's commitment to working for justice requires not only theoretical and practical projects, but also the cultivation of the feelings of concern, empathy, and compassion that motivate action for justice. This, too, is part of the tradition of Catholic education, and it may well serve as a powerful force in the further development of that tradition as it attempts to respond to the challenges of global citizenship.

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